Ethics at a Glance

Communitarian Ethics

Communitarianism refers to a theoretical perspective that seeks to lessen the focus on individual rights and increase the focus on communal responsibilities. The definition of community varies and can refer to anything from the nuclear or extended family to the political state or nation. In this approach, ethical thought is grounded in communal values, established social standards and traditions, and considerations of the larger society. Communitarians emphasize the influence of society on individuals and contend that values are rooted in common history and tradition (Beauchamp and Childress 2001).

Tam (1998) suggests that communitarianism is based on three principles. The first requires that any claim of truth be validated through co-operative enquiry. Second, communities of co-operative inquiry, which represent the spectrum of citizens, should validate common values that become the basis of mutual responsibilities of all community members. And third, all citizens should have equal access and participation in the power structure of society.

A central premise of communitarianism is the recognition of society as a web of intersecting communities with differing moral values and standards (Johnson 2005). The key to resolving ethical questions and conflicts lies in respect for local values that demonstrate careful deliberation and local community acceptance. Consideration is also given to general alignment and accountability with the values of the larger society; however, the system of moral rules of a particular community is best understood in the context of that community's current and historical view of social welfare and related social interests, lending a certain level of cultural relativism to this perspective.

This leads to a second premise that emphasizes the common good as an ideal. Such a premise downplays the values of individuality, autonomy, and personal rights, so prevalent in other ethical theories, in favor of a focus on the virtues and actions that support the interests of society as a whole. While this does include respect for human life and dignity, allowing for all persons to achieve a meaningful potential, the common good also calls for concern for long-term sustainability, intergenerational justice, an emphasis on active and informed citizenship, and a balance between individual and communal interests. At times, the common good may require all citizens to consider the needs of the broader community above the needs of any one individual, group, or organization.

Communitarian thought clearly contributes to the ethical dialogue in the health care context. This is particularly true with respect to issues such as the best use of limited health care resources, health care as a right, and the concept of healthy communities versus an emphasis on individual health.

Strengths of the communitarian perspective include the emphasis on strong connections between people, encouragement of collaboration, diminished emphasis on self-serving individualism, and sacrifice for the greater good as a measure of character. On the negative side, many would question how realistic it is to achieve a common set of global, or even local, values. We might also be concerned with the potential for erosion of individual rights and no systematic method for resolving ethical conflicts (Johnson, 2005).

For more on communitarianism see:

Infed Encyclopedia. Communitarianism.
http://www.infed.org/biblio/communitarianism.htm

The Communitarian Network. The Responsive Communitarian Platform.
http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/platformtext.html

The George Washington University Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies.
http://www.gwu.edu/~icps/vision.html

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Communitarianism.
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/communitarianism/

Wikipedia. Communitarianism. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communitarian